DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 381 315 RC 020 036

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TITLE Career Paths, Career Aspirations, Networking, and Mentoring among Special Education Administrators.
PUB DATE Mar 95
NOTE 6p.; In: Reaching to the Future: Boldly Facing Challenges in Rural Communities. Conference Proceedings of the American Council on Rural Special Education (ACRES) (Las Vegas, Nevada, March 15-18, 1995); see RC 020 016.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Attitudes; Administrators; *Career Planning; Elementary Secondary Education; *Mentors; *Occupational Aspiration; *Rural Schools; Special Education; Surveys
IDENTIFIERS *Networking; Texas (East)

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the perceptions and experiences of rural special education administrators with regard to career advancement. A 31-item questionnaire was developed that focused on administrator attitudes and experiences regarding networking, mentoring, career paths, and career aspirations. The survey was completed by 15 special education administrators from small or rural school districts in east Texas. Among survey respondents, 73 percent were female, 47 percent had held a special education administrative position for over 10 years, and 73 percent had taught for over 10 years before becoming an administrator. Results suggest that career advancement among these rural administrators is not a major priority. Respondents did not view networking as important in career advancement, but rather as a vehicle for information and support within the profession. Nor did respondents perceive mentoring as a career enhancement tool. Mentors were reported to be information providers or supporters only. Additionally, respondents did not admit to having had a career plan leading to their administrative position, and they did not aspire to other administrative positions. This paper lists respondents' ideal qualities in a mentor and suggestions for further research in this area. (SV)

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ED 381 315

CAREER PATHS, CAREER ASPIRATIONS, NETWORKING, AND MENTORING AMONG SPECIAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATORS

Fostering the development of leadership in special education is the key to providing creative solutions to special education programming in the future. The men and women who choose to enter special education administration have particular challenges to face, with unique school and community roles to play. For professionals serving in rural areas, the experiences for career development to meet the future challenges may be very different. Very little is known about the career paths and aspirations of rural special education administrators.

The necessary role of a mentor to facilitate entrance into the professional field is well documented in the literature. A mentor informs initiates of the political and social knowledge to effective leadership. The availability and the role of a mentor may be substantially affected by the size and nature of the school district. What have special education administrators done to use, seek or become a mentor?

Another strategy integral to successful leadership is networking. The opportunity to learn with others and develop collaborative relationships enriches the quality of work and its environment. What is the nature of the formal or informal network system for rural special education administrators? This study was a beginning attempt to explore the issues associated with career development in special education administration.

The purpose of this pilot study was twofold. The primary purpose was to extend the research base regarding career enhancement in the field of public school administration, with particular attention to special educators in rural and small schools. Second, the pilot study was used to develop and field test a survey instrument which would be valid in determining the perceptions and experiences of special education administrators in rural and small school districts. Four areas related to career advancement were examined: networking, mentoring, career paths, and career aspirations.

RC 020036

Method

Procedure and Subjects

The subjects for this pilot study were 15 special education administrators in small or rural school districts from an east Texas regional educational service center area. For this investigation rural was defined as a school district with an enrollment of less than 2500 students (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1990) and small was defined as a school district with an enrollment of between 2500 and 3500 students.

A pilot survey instrument was administered and completed at a monthly special education administrator meeting. All special education administrators in attendance completed the survey. The surveys of all respondents who indicated that they were employed in a rural or small school district were included in this pilot study.

Data in this pilot study were initially analyzed using descriptive statistics on each of the survey instrument question clusters of demographics, networking, mentoring, career path, and career aspiration.

Instrument

The 31 item questionnaire was piloted with the sample group and was divided into five sections. The first section was comprised of 9 items designed to obtain biographic, demographic, and basic career experience data from the subjects. The second section included 6 items designed to identify subjects' perceptions and experiences regarding networking. The third section contained 9 items centered on subjects' views and experiences with mentoring. A fourth section on career paths included 3 items that dealt with the subjects' career paths and barriers to the special education administrative position. A final section was composed of 4 items that included the subjects' responses to administrative career aspirations both in and out of special education.

A copy of the pilot survey instrument is displayed in Figure 1. Respondents were instructed to review each item and respond with either a scale response, a yes - no response, or an open-ended written response. Respondents took no more than 15 minutes to complete this pilot instrument.

Findings

Sample

The sample for this pilot study was selected based upon the following criteria:

a. subjects had to be currently serving as a special education director, coordinator, or supervisor.
b. subjects had to serve in this position in a rural or small school district.

c. subjects had to be participating in the monthly meeting of the special education administrators from one Texas regional educational service center.

The gender of the sample of the pilot group of special education administrators was 27% male and 73% female. Seventy-three percent were special education directors and 27% were special education supervisors. Fifty-three percent of the administrators had held a special education administrative position between 1 and 10 years, while 47% had held positions over 11 years. Seventy-three percent of the subjects taught more than 10 years prior to their first administrative appointment.

Networking

Eighty percent of the subjects rated networking from important to very important. Thirteen percent of the subjects rated networking from somewhat important to not important. Seven percent had no opinion. Ninety-three percent of the subjects indicated that they are in a networking group.

The subjects' reported their primary interests in joining a networking group were to gain skills or information necessary to complete the job or to obtain advice regarding job tasks. The benefits listed by the subjects for being a member of a networking group were as follows: helps me stay enthusiastic, gives support, provides information, broadens perspectives, preparation for the future, and allows time for visiting. The subjects defined networking in line with what they determined to be their interests for joining a group or with the benefits listed. Definitions for networking given were as follows: sharing information, getting advice, communicating with those in the same field, or solving problems. No subjects mentioned career advancement in conjunction with networking.

Mentoring

A large percentage (80%) of the subjects rated mentoring from important to very important. Seven percent of the subjects rated networking as not important. Thirteen percent had no opinion. Sixty-seven percent of the subjects indicated that they had been mentored. Of those indicating they had been mentored, 70% had male mentors and 50% had female mentors (some indicated as 50% supervisors or 50% colleagues; only seven percent indicated that the mentor was either a friend or a professor).

The subjects indicated that the mentors worked with them in the following ways:

- instructed and supported, encouraged, gave guidance and direction, listened, questioned, and offered suggestions.

They defined mentoring as encouraging and supporting a person in one's own field, a person who has more experience in the field supporting one with less experience, giving guidance and encouragement, coaching, helping others to gain knowledge, giving others processes to help perform the job, and teaching others about people. Forty-seven percent of the subjects indicated that they had been mentors. They reported that they mentored through: sharing experiences, reminding, listening, suggesting, guiding, encouraging, questioning, problem solving, supporting, and providing information. None indicated mentoring activities commonly associated with helping others obtain another position.

They indicated that they would look for the following qualities in a mentor:

professional attitude	experience
understanding	wisdom
respect	organized
open-minded	listener
supportive	information provider
knowledgeable	flexible
coaching skills	common sense
human relations skills	caring
non-judgmental	helper

No subject mentioned that they would expect the mentor to offer information on available positions, counseled them regarding career preparation or advancement, or sponsor them for alternative administrative positions.

Career Path

In responding to the question, "When did you first aspire to be a special education administrator?", 20% gave dates, such as 1983 or 8 years after I began teaching. Thirteen percent indicated a definite desire to move into a special education administrative position for a greater challenge. However, sixty percent of the subjects indicated that they never aspired to be a special education administrator or that it was just by chance that they obtained the position.

Fifty-three percent of the subjects perceived there to be no barriers to their obtaining an administrative position in special education. Thirteen percent expressed a lack of confidence as a barrier to obtaining an administrative position, while 7% indicated a lack of experience. Twenty percent of the subjects indicated that availability of positions was a barrier.

Career Aspirations

Only 20% of the subjects indicated a desire for further administrative aspirations. The present pilot investigation did not ask respondents to identify why they did not have further

administrative aspirations. Although only 2 respondents aspired to move up in their careers, 47% of the total respondents indicated that their current special education administrative position would allow them access to other administrative positions. the greatest barriers indicated by the subjects in their efforts to move ahead in an administrative career path were lack of regard for special education among regular education (33%) and a general lack of expertise in general education (47%).

Discussion

The evidence presented by this pilot investigation suggests that career advancement among special education administrators in rural school districts is not a major priority. Although the results can not be generalized to the larger group of rural special education administrators; initial evidence from this sample reveals that the group is relatively closed and stable in their positions. They do not view networking as important in career advancement, rather they view networking as a vehicle for information and support within the profession. Neither do they perceive mentoring as a career enhancement tool. Mentors were reported to be information providers or supporters only. Additionally, they did not admit to having a career plan leading to the special education administration position. They referred to their attainment of the position more as happenstance. They did not aspire to other administrative positions.

Further Research Recommendations

The investigators accomplished the purposes of this research and propose the following changes for a comprehensive study which would be more generalizable to the population of special education administrators:

a. Refine the survey to a more discriminating instrument with quantifiable responses.
b. Leave space on the survey to answer in written form to encourage reflection and more viable qualitative data.
c. Alter the demographic variables to include a question about the years of teaching prior to first special education administrative position.
d. Alter the career path variable to obtain more specific data about history of career.
e. Modify the career aspiration variable to include an explanation of why the administrator does not desire to move into other administrative positions.
f. Conduct a survey of a random sample of 400 rural special education administrators (8 per state) on a national scale.
g. Explore other related variables, such as role models for the rural or small school special education administrators.